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ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of children are being labeled emotionally and behaviorally disturbed and are at risk of later antisocial behavior and school dropout. To change problem behavior, students and their caregivers must be taught to use new and better skills, and schools must systematically implement strategies to ensure that these skills are generalized and maintained in multiple settings. School-wide planning is essential to developing interventions. Positive behavior support consists of four interrelated systems: school-wide procedures to define, teach, reward, and correct students' social behavior; procedures to address problems that arise from scheduling, monitoring, and architectural flaws; classroom procedures that teachers use to maintain order and motivation; and individual student procedures that provide extra resources and structures to support and control the 5-7 percent of students who typically present behavioral challenges. Target interventions may be designed for individual students or small groups with similar needs. When target interventions are not successful, intensive individual behavior intervention plans are designed, involving multiagency planning and cooperation beyond the school. Criminal justice, social services, or mental health specialists may need to be involved in addition to school staff. Rural teachers can feel powerless and isolated when beginning a system of positive behavior management. Important supports for teachers are mentors, released time for observation of experienced teachers, regular sessions that allow for sharing and support, continuing professional development, and encouraging reflective practice. (Contains 19 references.) (TD)

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CREATING CLASSROOMS IN RURAL SETTINGS THAT PREVENT DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS

Abstract

Teachers across rural America daily face classrooms with increasing numbers of students who exhibit problems, characterized by high rates of inattention, hyperactivity, defiance and noncompliance. Problems are escalating at younger ages and prevalence rates indicate that 7% to 20% of preschool children meet the diagnostic criteria for oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) or conduct disorder (CD). Not only are these children a management problem but they often need academic assistance in learning to read and with language delays (Bryan, 1991; Kavale & Forness, 1998). According to the U. S. Department of Education's 2000 annual report to Congress, approximately 1% of the school population has been labeled Emotionally and Behaviorally Disturbed (EBD).

Teachers need to manage young aggressive and noncompliant children because of these behaviors remain in place over time there is a risk of antisocial behavior in adolescence. Early behavior problems are identified as a predictor of later drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, violence and school dropout (Kazdin, 1995). Unfortunately, the rise in zero tolerance policies for antisocial behavior increases the likelihood that such problems do not receive services and even fewer receive research-supported interventions (Kazdin & Kendall, 1998).

To be successful in school, children must develop academic and social competence. The majority of children vulnerable to school failure are referred to a child study team because of chronic achievement and/or behavioral problems. Children are most often referred when they have persistent reading problems, disruptive or aggressive behavior, or both (Lloyd, Kauffman, Landrum & Roe, 1991). When this referral is made, it signals that a teacher has reached the limit of his or her tolerance with respect to individual differences. No longer does the teacher feel optimistic or confident about their ability to manage the child's behavior or to provide effective instruction within the context of the larger group.

Classroom instruction and discipline are enhanced when a teacher pays close attention to the multiple elements involved in the classroom. Teaching the core curriculum is a legal requirement. To not teach the requisite content areas (reading, language arts, mathematics, social studies and science) is illegal. To omit instruction actually serves to further handicap children with EBD. If instructional goals and objectives which typically address affective and sociobehavioral domains are attained, and the students have not simultaneously been provided access to the core curriculum, how can these children possibly be successful?

Today there is recognition that schools and teachers must address a full range of student behavior, teaching expectations and routines to all pupils, and respond with positive interventions. Positive behavior support is being implemented in hundreds of schools throughout the United States. It provides a context for identifying and serving students in general education so there is no loss of instructional time. Two decades of research (LaVigna & Donnellan, 1986) has shown that if we look at behavior as functional communications then students can be taught adaptive behaviors to serve the same function. The cornerstones of positive behavior support are functional behavioral assessments (FBA) of problem behavior and positive behavioral intervention planning.

The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA '97) mandates that individualized education plan (IEP) teams use the FBA and positive behavior intervention planning process for all students with disabilities whose behavior provokes consideration of a change in educational placement. Public concerns regarding school safety have prompted schools to think proactively and one outcome of this thinking is the concept of positive behavior support has been broaden to an approach that may be applied to entire schools.

Educators have begun to think about schools as communities and of improving the capacity of the school setting to support the use of effective practices. Effective communities include policies, structures and routines that

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promote the use of research based practices. It has been demonstrated that the application of strategies that promote positive behavior support across the total school community. Accordingly, teachers have had to think in terms of providing positive behavior across the entire range of student behavior. This has been elaborated into school-wide integrated systems of intervention, which emphasize multiple levels of prevention (Sugai & Horner, 1999).

As Sugai and Horner (1999) explain, positive behavior support consists of four interrelated systems: school-wide procedures to define, teach, reward and correct pupil social behavior; specific setting procedures to address problems that arise from scheduling, monitoring and architectural flaws; classroom procedures that teachers use in their own classrooms to maintain order and motivation; and, individual student procedures to provide extra resources and structures to support and control the 5-7% of students who typically present 50% or more of the behavior challenges in the school. Obviously, since school-wide planning is essential prerequisite to developing interventions it has been shown that 80% of school staff must be committed to the process. Generally, the process involves a meeting of the entire school staff, including office workers, administrators, custodians, cafeteria workers and bus drivers, as well as teaching faculty. A School Climate Team is formed and given the responsibility of assessing the school environment. The assessment includes an examination of the physical environment to identify where behavior problems occur; routines and schedules that comprise specific contexts in which problems are more likely to happen; how students are monitored throughout the school; and existing disciplinary responses and their effects (Lewis-Palmer, Sugai & Larson, 1999).

The team presents the results of their assessment to the staff and leads them through the process of developing a plan based on the assessment data. Specific components of these plans vary from school to school but typically include: establishing a set of clear behavioral expectations for students in all school areas and activities; identifying strategies for teaching those expectations to students and rewarding them for complying; planning alterations in physical settings and routines; establishing provisions to ensure that students are monitored at all times; and making decisions about how rule violations are to be dealt. Schools that have worked through these implementation criteria have experienced substantial reduction in discipline referral rates, when appropriately implemented approximately 90% of students respond positively (Nelson, Martella & Galand, 1998).

Significant reductions in discipline referrals with the 90% allow the staff to concentrate on the needs of the other 10% with whom the universal interventions are not effective. Students in this group can be considered at-risk and without the proper support, they may experience academic failure and develop enduring patterns of antisocial behavior. These students who often develop disruptive behavior disorders have distinct profiles, which typically include four or more of the following characteristics: academic problems; low academic motivation; problems in peer relationships; associations with deviant peers, aggression, attention problems, hyperactivity, and family difficulties (Farmer, Farmer & Gut, 1999).

Target interventions may be designed for individual students or small groups having similar needs. Important elements include functional assessments of problem behavior; identification, instruction and reinforcement of desired replacement behavior; effective direct instruction of both academic and social skills; learning strategies; and systematic plans for responding to behavior. For individual students a behavior intervention plan (BIP) is developed from the functional assessment. Skills are identified that can serve as replacement behaviors, and these are taught, prompted, and reinforced. Data must be collected to monitor the target and replacement behaviors and decisions are made that govern when the BIP will need to be revised or replaced. Criteria for an effective BIP include clearly written, so everyone involved understands; implemented as written; evaluate the plan regularly and systematically against data decision rules; and revise as often as needed (Scott & Nelson, 1999).

The goal of positive behavior support is to create a community that facilitates and supports student behavior. There are three levels of positive behavior support, universal interventions (school and classroom), targeted interventions (specialized group and individual), and intensive interventions (individual, comprehensive, interagency). Universal interventions are preventative in nature, implemented across all staff and students, collect and monitor school-wide data and predict when and where problems may occur. The school team will do an analysis of physical school arrangements that assesses logistical and architectural factors to minimize the potential for disruptive or dangerous behavior. This assessment provides information critical to setting physical boundaries to keep students in areas that can be monitored, arranging schedules to avoid potential conflicts, and directing student traffic to minimize student numbers in limited areas.

Each teacher will develop a clear set of rules for their classroom. These rules are shared with all faculty and staff and must be both agreeable and enforceable. Staff generate a common list of rules to facilitate safe learning environments. Be sure rules are brief, positive, aimed at the problem areas and publicly posted. All school staff teach the rules to the students through modeling, practice and correction. Staff reinforce students for positive behavior and following the rules.

Staff organize and plan for supervision of all students in all areas where they may congregate. Everyone assumes responsibility for students during transition times and in common areas. Even out of bounds areas for students must be monitored. All staff take responsibility for monitoring students. Supervision is active and engaged with teachers moving about and interacting with students. Procedures are established to facilitate quick assistance when needed and requested.

A plan for the consequences of misbehavior must be determined in advance. This plan must align with district and state policies and guidelines. Discipline should be used to prevent further misbehavior and keep students in school. Consequences, whether positive or negative, are applied immediately. Consistency is critical and consequences must be applied by all staff and across all students. Accurate records and data of disciplinary actions are kept and analyzed to track repeat off offenses and offenders.

Targeted interventions for specialized individuals and small groups are characterized by written individualized plans; used on students for whom universal interventions have not been successful; based on functional assessment; involve effective instruction; and carried out at home and school. Teachers must focus on effective instruction in both academic and social skills. After completion of a functional behavioral assessment to determine specific problems, functional replacement behaviors are taught and supported. These targeted interventions require a thorough knowledge of effective systems of behavior management (Wheeler, 1999).

A Behavior intervention plan (BIP) must be written. This plan identifies the function of the behavior of the student and appropriate replacement behaviors. A BIP must provide for systematic teaching of the appropriate replacement behaviors; arrangement of the environment to facilitate success, prompting and reinforcement; include a specially designed behavior management component; written behavioral objectives; and a mechanism to collect and evaluate data on a consistent basis.

When target interventions are not successful, intensive individual that are comprehensive and often include an interagency component are written. These plans are written and designed to be carried out across a range of settings requiring multiagency planning and cooperation. These plans are based on needs within and beyond the school and provide wraparound services for students.

Careful planning for involvement of community resources is required. In-depth and continuous assessment from a variety of sources and perspectives is required for these students. These students may require criminal justice, social services or mental health specialists to be involved in planning and assessment in addition to school staff. As needed or when necessary, activities will be formally written into IEPs. Teachers must have a thorough knowledge of and ability to access a full range of school and community support services with the school acting as a liaison for the planning of wraparound services. Wraparound services are used with individual students; based on unique child and family needs; built upon child, family and provider needs; use traditional and nontraditional interventions; encompass multiple life domains, school, home and community; resources are blended; services are planned, implemented and evaluated by a team; team supports child, family and service providers; and readily changeable if it isn't working.

To change problem behavior, to teach students and their caregivers to use new and better skills, schools must systematically implement strategies to ensure that these skills are generalized and maintained in multiple settings (Rutherford & Nelson, 1988). The concepts and strategies presented are beginning to be widespread in many of our rural settings. There successful implementation depends on continuing support of administrators and policy makers.

Rural teachers can feel powerless and isolated, especially when beginning a system of positive behavior support. Developing teacher mentor networks is one strategy. Many teachers indicate that having access to an

experienced mentor as one of the most important contributors to job satisfaction (Conderman & Stephens, 2000; McCaffrey, 2000; Whitaker, 2000). Other important supports are released time for guided observations of experienced teachers; technology access facilitating communication; regular sessions that allow for sharing and support; continuing professional development; and encouraging reflective practice (Boyer & Gillespie, 2000).

Schools are being challenged to meet increasingly higher standards of student achievement, to create safe and effective learning environments, and to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. In addressing this challenge, teachers are collaborating with other professionals, parents and community representatives in developing innovative and effective strategies for supporting students. The discipline regulations of IDEA '97 are forcing educators to view students with behavioral problems differently, make systematic changes in interventions, and service delivery (Wheeler, 1996).

To function effectively, teachers need support systems. The foundation of effective instruction and behavioral interventions for students with or at-risk for EBD is a system of school-wide positive behavior support, which addresses the full range of student behavior. Ultimately, the success of interventions will depend on the ability to bridge professional and political boundaries. Teachers must accept responsibility for designing strategies for students that provide meaningful experiences to ensure that skills acquired in educational settings are retained and used to facilitate lifelong patterns of success.

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